DCCUMENT RESUME

ED 141 471 UD 017 106

AUTHOR Claerbaut, David
TITLE Ethnicity in the American University System.
PUB DATE 77
NCTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Changing Attitudes; Class Attitudes; Cultural Pluralism; Ethnic Groups; *Ethnicity; *Group Relations; *Higher Education; *Majority Attitudes; *Minority Groups; Sociology; Universities; Values
IDENTIFIERS *Ethnicity

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the current state of ethnicity in the American university system, using the sociological paradigms applicable to majority-minority relations in its analysis. The English scholasticist-elite concept from which the American concept of higher education grew, focuses on white middle class cultural interests, and arises out of a white, Northern European perception of history, culture, and logic. This view of education has been challenged by a more egalitarian concept which puts forth the notion that education should serve the entire society, by offering each citizen the opportunity to develop his or her potential to the highest possible point. The collision of these two views is at the core of much of the majority-minority tension in higher education today. The American university system is still largely controlled by individuals who are deeply imbued with the scholasticist-elite notion. The university has not made the transition to the egalitarian concept. If the white middle class, scholasticist-elite oriented population is viewed as a majority group and the racial and ethnic minorities are collectively viewed as the minority group, it is possible to sharpen the focus on the problem by employing the perspectives operative in majority-minority relations. The current situation in the university system seems to fall somewhere between conciliation and conversion. Changes are due largely to governmental intervention in the form of the enforcement of Civil Rights guidelines and should move in the direction of pluralism and diversity. (Author/AM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED141471

ETHNICITY IN THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Dr. David Claerbaut,

Assistant Professor of Sociology and Psychology,

North Park College, Chicago, Illinois

UD017106

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Despite its lofty claims and eagerness to receive credit for extending the boundaries of pluralism, the American university system is far from being truly multiethnic in nature. The appearance of diversity and multiculturalism is evident but substance is lacking. Despite special programming, equal opportunity employment, quotas, and other ventures into pluralism, the university system is not an open entity in which power and opportunity are shared in a democratic fashion across ethnic boundaries, such that it provides a model of a multiethnic community of learners.[1] This paper examines the current state of ethnicity in the American university system, using the sociological paradigms applicable to majority-minority relations in its analyses.

The reason for the lack of multiethnicity in the university system can be traced to the origins of American higher education. The American concept of higher education is an outgrowth of the English scholasticist-elite concept.[2] Higher education, in the scholasticist-elite tradition, was designed by the socially and politically elite to serve and shape its youth to carry on leadership in the major institutions of English society--most notably the church and the government. The scholasticist-elite notion holds that education is for the select few who will become the decision-makers and molders of the future society. It is obvious from this view that education was never intended to be a democratic, multi-class entity, but rather served to perpetuate the power and interests of the dominant group.

In the United States, the scholasticist-elite view of education,

embraced and advanced by the white middle class, has been challenged by a more egalitarian concept.[3] Although this egalitarian view can be traced to such famous individuals as Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey, it did not really become prominent until the tumultuous 1960's when with campus revolts, the Great Society, and especially minority movements such as Black, Brown, and Red Power, it became evident that the WASP scholasticist-elite approach must give way to a more multiclass, multiethnic, democratic concept.

According to the egalitarian notion, education should serve the entire society, by offering each citizen the opportunity to develop his/her potentialities to the highest possible point. This view holds that society should offer education of all types in order to prepare personnel for the work of the nation. With no limitation to the types of education offered there is no limit to the number of people or social groups entering post-secondary education. In fact, the more the merrier, as the more educated the populace, the more aware and productive it becomes. The more skillful and capable the society, the better the quality of its life.

Although espoused by many white liberals, the egalitarian notion is fundamental to minority interests and multiethnicity. Basic to it, is the belief that racial and ethnic minorities be truly integrated into a higher educational system which is pluralistic and open to all individuals and cultures.

The scholasticist-elite concept, on the other hand, focuses on white middle class cultural interests, as it arises out of a white, Northern European perception of history, culture, and logic. The scholasticist-elite tradition places a premium on studying the works of thinkers out of a Western genre. It empha-

sizes a rational and cognitive approach to learning with affect and spontaneity excluded. The curriculum has a heavy WASP overlay, one which omits the histories and perspectives of Japanese-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos, blacks, and other minorities. History, as the adage goes, is written by the "winners," and so American and world history are really Anglo interpretations of reality. One of the goals of the scholasticist-elite tradition is to produce the "educated person"--one who is well-versed in the traditional academic disciplines taught from the perspective of Anglo thinking.

The egalitarian notion, with its emphasis on the development of the skills and potential of the individual, has a less traditional, more democratic flavor. In fact, it changes the very function of education from one stressing the mastery of a cognitive body of knowledge to one emphasizing individual social mobility and societal enhancement. As all groups are to be educated, indeed all cultural perspectives and experiences are considered valuable and instructive.

The collision of these two views--the scholasticist-elite and the egalitarian--is at the core of much of the majority-minority tension in higher education today; for at present, the American university system is one peopled largely by individuals who are deeply imbued with the scholasticist-elite notion. These individuals administrate and provide the education for an increasing number of minority (as well as many urban whites) students who are cut from the egalitarian cloth.

The university simply has not made the transition to the egalitarian concept. It espouses some egalitarian values and attempts to

cast the image of actively replacing elitism and arrogance with diversity and equality. However, there seems to be less going on than meets the eye; for despite window-dressing and shrewd public relations, the old traditions and values are held dear and defended in the name of "maintaining standards."

Pluralism exists mainly in the composition of the university's student population, with multiethnicity confined to the presence of certain special "minority studies" programs in the catalog. The power factions in the administrative, faculty, and staff ranks are dominated by individuals trained in the scholasticist-elite tradition. Illustrative of this dominance are the findings of James Conyers' ongoing study of black sociology Ph.D's which indicate that while black sociologists seem to have little difficulty finding employment in major universities, they are almost invariably hired in at the lowest ranks. From this point they either adopt the prevailing style and values of the institution or leave long before the university has to make a commitment to them in the form of tenure.[4]

In the face of charges of cultural and intellectual oppression, the university system seems to have changed just enough so that it would not have to change at all. By recruiting more non-Anglos and hastily inaugurating what often amounted to tokenist minority programs, universities were able to project the appearance of change without, in fact, making any genuine commitment to multiethnic education. This lack of commitment is further evidenced by the fact that as the surges of activism began to subside in the 1970's, interest in minority programs and research quickly waned. The result seems to be a near reversion to the status quo dominated atmosphere of the 1950's.

Majority Policy

If we view the white middle class, scholasticist-elite oriented population as a majority group, with racial and ethnic minorities collectively constituting the minority group, it is possible to sharpen the focus on the problem by employing the perspectives operative in majority-minority relations.

In majority-minority interaction, each group usually has a desired strategy or policy it would prefer to govern the situation. In applying Simpson and Yinger's majority group strategies to the university system, "permitted assimilation" seems to the favored policy of the white middle class majority.[5] According to this policy, the majority permits minority members to be assimilated in and become part of the system if they willingly divest themselves of their distinctive tendencies in the process.

Although oppressive, it is certainly more humane than past policies. Only a few decades ago, "extermination" seemed operative, as minorities were either denied entry into universities or were admitted only to flunk out shortly thereafter. This policy gave way to one resembling "continued subjugation," in which minorities were reluctantly tolerated and forced to do all the adjusting, with the institutions being neither aware ofnor caring about this oppressiveness.

Minority Policies

In terms of Wirth's minority policies, it seems that in the 1950's minorities favored assimilation, as they seemed willing to leap through almost any of the majority's cultural hoops in order to succeed in the university system.[6] The 1960's took a "secessionist" turn, with angry and alienated groups demanding separate dormitories, exclusive

campus associations, ethnic studies programs, and other changes in the system to accommodate their specific needs.

Today "pluralism" seems in vogue. It allows the various groups to perpetuate and even develop their subcultural distinctiveness without surrendering first-class citizenship in the institution whether they be students, faculty, or staff.

Current Situation

With the majority holding the institutional trump cards, the state of any majority-minority relationship is usually more reflective of its rather than the minority's policy.

The current situation seems to fall somewhere between "conciliation" and "conversion."[7] In conciliation, the majority makes certain specific concessions to appease the minority, which in turn, attempts to accommodate most of the majority's desires. In conversion, the minority willingly adopts the majority's outlook in hopes of gaining full-fledged acceptance (rather similar to permitted assimilation).

In terms of the American university system, conciliation is evidenced by institutions relaxing certain of their waspish rules in addition to instituting various special programs and procedures in order to appear to meet minorities halfway. Conversion is evident in a variety of ways; one is through honoring minority students, faculty, and staff in the form of grades, tenure, or promotion, who seem genuinely to fit into the university's mainstream. These individuals are held up as models to other minorities to encourage their adjustment.

The current state, then, is not a healthy one; for, as previously

noted, it is one heavy on public profile and light on private substance. It makes an educational system, devoted to honest inquiry and humane ideals, one characterized by a good deal of hypocrisy.

To the extent that changes are occurring, they are due largely to governmental intervention in the form of the enforcement of Civil Rights guidelines as well as Affirmative Action programs. Noteworthy is that these changes are forced on the system from the outside. This is not unusual, for the history of the American university system is such that fundamental changes have almost invariably been the result of external pressures (such as economic stringencies, social unrest, or law) rather than internal initiatives.

The Future

The American university system, given its ideals of social and technological progress, could be expected to set the pace in moving toward pluralism and diversity. Yet, with its heritage of conservatism, coupled with the political stagnancy of the 1970's, little seems to be happening. As such, the immediate future of ethnicity in American higher education is doubtful. Nonetheless, it is in the best interests of the system to move forward; not only because in doing so it will be approaching some of its humanitarian ideals, but also to avoid being externally forced forward by a society it is committed to lead.

FOOTNOTES

[1]David Claerbaut, "Minorities in Higher Education: The Forgotten Crisis," American Ethnic Revival, ed. by Jack Kinton (Aurora, Illinois: Social Science and Sociological Resources, 1977), pp. 193-203.

[2]L. Richard Meeth, "The Underachiever in American Higher Education," paper presented at Workshop on Teaching the 3 R's to the Underprepared, Cleveland, Ohio, November 12, 1976.

[3]Ibid.

[4]James Conyers, "Black Ph.D.'s in Sociology," paper presented at Midwest Sociological Society, 1976 Annual Meetings, St. Louis, Mo., April 23, 1976.

[5]George E. Simpson and J. Milton Yinger, Racial and Cultural Minorities (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), pp. 24-35.

[6]Ibid., pp. 23-24.

[7]Robert E. Park, Race and Culture (New York: The Free Press, 1950).

REFERENCES

Claercaut, David 1977. "Minorities in Higher Education: The Forgotten Crisis." American Ethnic Revival, ed. by Jack Ainton. Aurora, Illinois: Social Science and Sociological Resources. PP. 195-203.

Conyers, James 1976. "Black Ph.D.'s in Sociology." Paper presented at the Midwest Sociological Society, 1976 Annual Meetings. St. Louis, Mo., April 23, 1976.

Meeth, L. Richard 1976. "The Underachiever in American Higher Education." Paper presented at Workshop on Teaching the 3 R's to the Underprepared. Cleveland, Ohio, November 12, 1976.

Park, Robert E 1950. Race and Culture. New York: The Free Press.

Simpson, George E., and Yinger, J. Milton 1953. Racial and Cultural Minorities. Rev. ed. New York: Harper and Row.